

## One Foot In Front of the Other by OnMyShore

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**Summary:**

*“How are you doing, Steve? Really?”*

*“Me? I’m fine.” Steve takes a step back, moving a little closer to the door.*

*“Why, don’t I look fine?”*

*“You look...” She’s still staring at him. “Tired. You look tired.”*

Steve Harrington has a few unresolved issues after the almost-end-of-the-world.

# One Foot In Front of the Other

## Author's Note:

Season 2 gave me more feelings than I know what to do with, and thus...fic.

Title taken from "One Foot" by Walk The Moon

The first few flakes of snow are starting to fall when Steve Harrington pulls up the curb in front of the Wheelers' house. The sun had gone down a couple of hours ago and the temperature has been falling steadily since then, but the windows of the house are gleaming warmly in the dark. From his car, Steve can see the Christmas tree already set up in the corner of the living room. Last year he had been inside, cuddled up with Nancy on the couch in front of the fireplace.

This year? Well, this year, instead of keeping Nancy company, he spends most of his time ferrying her little brother and his group of know-it-all wayward friends from one destination to another, a fact that hasn't gone unnoticed or unspoken by others. The way things are going for him lately, he figures he'll be lucky to make it past the driveway.

Steve kills the engine but hesitates to step out of the car, despite the chill already starting to creep in. Instead, he places his hands on the wheel and leans forward to look at the house, far enough that his cheek is nearly resting on his hands. He can't actually see any of the home's occupants from the road, but he knows they must be there. Mrs. Wheeler would never let Mike's friends spend the day in the house without some kind of supervision, and as far as Steve can tell Mr. Wheeler doesn't ever leave the house except to go to work.

As for Nancy, it could go either way. It's a Saturday night, but he feels like there's just as much chance of her being home as there is of her being out with Jonathan. Or in with Jonathan, because the idea that he could actually be inside the house is only just occurring to him now. A quick glance around, however, reveals that Jonathan's car is nowhere in sight, so at least he gets to dodge that bullet. Regardless of how okay he was with the breakup - and he is, which is

a surprise to him as much as anyone else - seeing them together still makes his chest ache, dully, like someone is stabbing him with a butter knife. He'd like to avoid that if possible, thank you very much.

The snow is starting to come down a little faster now, making Steve scowl at the night sky. He's avoiding going up the house now and he knows it. He'd been spared from actually seeing anyone when he'd dropped Dustin off earlier that day; the kid had practically catapulted himself out of the car before Steve could finish putting it in park, yelling, "*ThanksfortherideI'llseeyoulater!*" over his shoulder. Now, though, Steve would have to actually knock on the door and make conversation with whoever answered it while Dustin got his shit together, a prospect he ranked somewhere between getting hit in the face with a crowbar and tongue-kissing one of Dustin's Demodogs.

The glare of lights in the rearview catches his attention. He watches as the Wheelers' next-door neighbor pulls into the driveway, but she pauses as she exits the car, staring at Steve parked in the cul-de-sac with his headlights still on. Now he's starting to look like creep, so with a sigh he switches off the lights and climbs out. Seeing the neighbor still watching him, he gives a little half-hearted wave that she doesn't return, and he slams the door with just enough force that she jumps and scurries towards the garage.

*That went great*, he thinks as he makes his way to the front door.

Nancy's mother opens the door when he knocks, and she's not quite quick enough to cover up the look of surprise when she sees him standing on her front step. He supposes that's fair. He hasn't been back since he and Nancy broke up, and he always got the sense that she didn't really like him all that much in the first place. It makes sense, but that doesn't make him any less uncomfortable with the whole situation, and they stand in awkward silence for a moment that seems to stretch to infinity.

"Steven!" She recovers first, plastering a too-wide smile on her face. "This is certainly a surprise." She doesn't make a move to invite him in.

"Hi Mrs. Wheeler," he replies, resisting the urge to cross his arms or

jam his hands into his pockets like he's just been called into the principal's office. "I'm just here to pick Dustin up."

"Dustin?" She says it like it's the first time she's ever heard the name in her life.

"Yeah, I, uh, I said I would give him a ride today. To your house, I mean. And his, too, later, I guess. When they were done hanging out, or...whatever." She's still staring at him, in open confusion, and *holy shit*, so far this is going exactly as badly as he was had been expecting. "I mean, it's a pretty cold day, I figured, instead of riding his bike over I could just...you know..." He trails off and clears his throat. "Help him out. I guess."

"Oh." Mrs. Wheeler finally recovers, though the damage has mostly been done. "Oh! Well, that's...that's very nice of you, Steven. I didn't know you knew the Hendersons." Steve just nods awkwardly and she stares at him a moment longer, waiting for an answer. When she realizes he doesn't have one, she clears her throat and gestures over her shoulder, saying, "I guess I'll just...go get him for you?" She gives him another smile that does nothing to temper the uncertainty in her voice.

"That would be great, Mrs. Wheeler. Thank you." For a second he's sure she's going to make him wait outside, but she finally seems to take notice of the snow and opens the door wide enough to allow him in.

"The boys all play down in the basement, so I'll go call him up for you." She doesn't invite him further into the house. He thanks her again but she's already moving away from him towards the back, leaving him standing by himself in the front hall. He's just about to give himself a pat on the back for making it through the conversation relatively unscathed when he hears, "Steve?" and turns to see Nancy standing in the doorway to the living room. The sight of her is unexpected and he feels his heart drop to somewhere in the vicinity of his stomach. He can only hope none of it is showing on his face.

"Hey Nance." He falls into the old nickname purely from force of habit, and he runs his through his hair in an attempt to hide his

nervousness. This isn't the first time he's seen her since that night at the Byers' house - they still go to school together, after all, sharing slightly strained smiles when they pass each other in the halls. It is, however, the first time they've been alone together, close enough to actually strike up a conversation. Like her mother, she seems surprised to see him, but she smiles at him like she means it.

"Are you here for Dustin?" she asks, which is...unexpected, to say the least. Steve stares at her in surprise and she shrugs, blushing a little. "I saw you pick him up after the dance last weekend as I was leaving."

"Yeah, I just...you know. I let him hitch a ride with me. Sometimes. When he needs it."

"That's...that's really sweet of you."

"Yeah, well." Steve shrugs again. "He's a pretty good kid. When he's not being a pain in the ass."

Nancy laughs. "That's so true. I hope you're ready to wait for a while, they try to drag out their dumb game for as long as they can when they know it's time to leave. They're impossible."

"Oh perfect, I'm glad I don't have any other plans for tonight." Steve regrets the words as soon as they come out of his mouth but he can't exactly take them back. The air between them had been friendly, more so than he would have expected, but something about admitting that he's spending his Saturday night as a glorified chauffeur to her little brother's friend brings that to a screeching halt. Nancy laughs again, but it sounds more forced now, and Steve wonders if he'd be allowed to march downstairs and drag Dustin up himself.

"Well, I mean, it's not like I'm doing anything better," Nancy says, trying to smooth over the sudden awkwardness. "I mean, I'm just sitting at home so...at least you're getting out?"

"No plans with Jonathan tonight?" Steve keeps his tone light, but he can't quite look at her when he says it, finding a spot on the wall just

past her shoulder instead. Nancy, to her credit, doesn't seem to take offense; she just shrugs and glances at the floor.

"He said he had to work on some college application stuff. I offered to keep him company, but you know how he is." She gives him a little half-smile. "He likes to keep to himself sometimes." She sounds a little sad, and she must realize it because she immediately adds, "I mean, it's fine. It's totally fine, he and his family have been through a lot, I think sometimes he just needs some space, you know?"

"Yeah, sure." Steve doesn't know, not really. He can't relate to "needing some space." His first impulse when things start to go wrong is to seek out other people, to distract himself from the problem until either he feels like he can deal with it or it takes care of itself. Jonathan isolates himself in a way that Steve simply cannot understand; that's one of the fundamental differences between the two of them. Maybe it's one of the reasons Nancy chose Jonathan over him. Who knows.

"Your face looks a lot better," Nancy blurts out, and blushes again when Steve just raises his eyebrows at her. "I mean, the cuts and everything seem like they've healed up pretty good."

"Oh, yeah. Thanks." Steve touches the bridge of his nose where the skin had split open. "I guess I looked pretty rough that night, huh?"

"You didn't look great," Nancy agrees, which makes him chuckle. "I hope it at least looked worse than it felt?"

"I'm not sure that's possible," Steve says, and she shudders a little.

"That guy was a total asshole, right?"

"Oh yeah. Still is." Steve nods. "But he mostly stays out of my way, and as long as he leaves the kids alone I don't really give a shit what he does."

"He hasn't been bothering them since that night, has he?"

Steve shakes his head. "I don't think so. At least, Dustin hasn't said

anything about it. Has Mike?"

"No. Not to me, anyway." Nancy crosses her arms, looking slightly put-out. "Not that he would. You would think saving the world would get me out of evil older sister territory, but nope, apparently not. He'd probably be more likely to tell you if something was wrong."

"Yeah, for all the good that would do, apparently." There's a hint of bitterness creeping into his tone that he can't quite hide, and Nancy frowns at him.

"Steve," she starts to say, but he cuts her off with a vague wave of his hand.

"I got my ass kicked, Nancy. I was out cold, I didn't even know what had happened to him until after we got back. Those kids did most of the work, I wasn't much help to anyone."

"That's not true." Nancy's moved further into the room. "You were watching out for them, that's a big deal, Steve. And those kids...they really look up to you. I mean, Mike thinks the world of you now. He keeps telling me how you've gotten so much cooler since we broke up."

"Well, I always did say how you used to drag me down when we were together." Nancy raises her eyebrows in mock outrage, but she's biting her lip to hide a smile and Steve can't help smirking at her. "I mean it, I used to tell people that all the time. I hate to say it, Nance, but you're kind of a nerd."

Now Nancy laughs outright. "Well, now you're finally free to be cool again."

There's another pause, less awkward than before, but when Steve glances at her he's surprised to see her studying his face. "How are you doing, Steve? Really?"

"Me? I'm fine." Steve takes a step back, moving a little closer to the door. "Why, don't I look fine?"

“You look...” She’s still staring at him. “Tired. You look tired.”

“No. Yeah. I mean, sure.” Steve rubs the back of his neck where he can feel the tension starting to build. “I guess I haven’t been sleeping that great lately, but that’s normal, right? It’s not like it’s a big deal.” He can see concern starting to bloom on her face, and he rushes on. “It’s fine, it’s not like hallucinating or whatever, I’m just...you know,” he trails off, unable to find the words he needs. Nancy’s expression hasn’t changed.

“Do you, um...do you have someone you can talk to?” she asks him. Steve laughs, hating how harsh it sounds even to him.

“I thought about going to a doctor but I’m pretty sure they would lock me in a padded room if I started talking about fighting monsters from another dimension so that’s probably out.”

“Mrs. Byers has been taking Will to see someone,” Nancy says. “I don’t know all the details, but I think it’s someone who’s connected with the lab. Or used to be. So they’re out there, you know?”

“C’mon, Nance. What do you think my father would say if I told him I needed to see a shrink?”

“Well, look, if you ever need to talk...” She looks down at her hands where she’s twisted her fingers together, and then back up at him. “I know we’re not together anymore, but I’m still worried about you. I mean, we went through something horrible, and not a lot of people understand what that’s like. And I don’t...I just don’t want you to feel like you’re alone with this, because you’re not. I really want us to still be friends.”

Friends. Steve wants to be the bigger man here and accept her offer, because he knows she means it, and friends he can actually count on have been in short supply for him lately. Likewise, the offer of someone to talk to, to lean on if incredibly tempting, because Nancy hit dangerously close to the mark when she said he looked tired. He hasn’t had a decent night’s rest in over a month, his sleep punctuated with visions of tunnels and monsters and fists pummeling him into



the floor. His grades - never that great to begin with - are dropping, and it's only a matter of time before someone starts to notice. He's moved the bat studded with nails from the trunk of his car to the floor right behind the driver's seat, covered with a blanket so no one asks questions, because he doesn't know when he might need it again but he wants to be ready. And he doesn't know how to fit back into his old life and pretend everything is normal, because to the people around him, nothing has changed. All the movies say that things like this are supposed to bring people closer together, only that's bullshit because Steve has never felt more isolated in his life.

Nancy is still watching him and he's afraid to say anything because he knows once he starts talking he won't be able to stop, but he's saved by Dustin nearly colliding with him and he barrels down the hallway. "Dude, your timing *sucks*," he says by way of greeting. "Hi, Nancy."

"Hi Dustin," she returns with a small wave.

Steve rolls his eyes. "You knew what time I was coming, twerp, you had plenty of time to wrap it up."

"Don't call me twerp." Dustin shrugs into his coat. "And I'm serious, Will figured out a way to see into the Ethereal Place so we could communicate with the shadow figures, only he got attacked by a bunch of goblins and Mike had to cast Mage Hand and-"

"I don't understand anything you just said," Steve interrupts as Nancy stifles a laugh.

"That's because you haven't started playing D&D with us like I keep telling you to."

"Come on, man, you know I don't mess with that nerd shit."

"Oh yeah? If that's true why do you spend all your time with a bunch of nerds like us?"

"I'm just trying to raise your cool factor before you get to high school, you dorks need all the help you can get."

“Oh, great, am I supposed to say thank you for that?”

“That would be polite.” Steve looks to Nancy for some backup, only to discover that she’s already walked back into the living room, leaving the doorway empty. He turns back to Dustin, who’s staring at him with an expression of pity that would be unbearable coming from anyone, let alone an eight-grader.

“Dude,” he says. “You have *got* to get over her.”

Steve groans. “Just get your ass in the car, would you? I want to get out of here before it starts snowing for real.” He ushers Dustin outside ahead of him and only glances back once before quietly shutting the door behind him.

**Author's Note:**

Everything I know about Dungeons and Dragons I learned almost exclusively from listening to "The Adventure Zone," so if I fucked it up, mea culpa. I promise to do better next time.